



# **Japanese customer service and meeting the expectations of Japanese tourists in Finland**

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<p>The objective of this thesis is to study the Japanese style of hospitality and find out what makes it different from the service styles of other countries. Based on these findings the author wants to find out what aspects of Japanese customer service Finnish service providers could implement, in order to better meet the expectations of Japanese tourists.</p> <p>The thesis is non-commissioned and the idea for it came from the author's personal interest in and experience with Japanese hospitality.</p> <p>The thesis starts by discussing the importance of tourism in Finland and the increase of Japanese tourists to the country. A general explanation of what customer service is follows, and after that it looks at how both hospitality workers and customers view service as well as what they find important. It goes on to discuss the Japanese service style and how it and other countries' styles differ from each other.</p> <p>Next, the research objective, methodology and delimitations are presented. The thesis makes use of the qualitative approach and a literature review. This method let the author take a deeper look at the research question from the inside to try to understand it with the whole picture in mind. The qualitative approach better explains the theoretical and historical background of the problem than the quantitative. The author chose to focus the thesis on Japan because of personal interest in the country and experience of its service style.</p> <p>The findings of the thesis are that the Japanese expect quality service and the kind of service they are used to from back at home, even when they travel abroad. They appreciate being able to use Japanese language when travelling. Finnish service providers that deal with Japanese people should learn about the Japanese service style and adapt it in order to meet the expectations of the Japanese customers and satisfy them. These results confirmed the author's own view on Japanese service and Japanese tourists' expectations.</p> <p>The thesis concludes with a reflection on the author's own learning and lastly with suggestions for further research.</p>	
<b>Keywords</b> Customer service, Japan, service quality, customer satisfaction	

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# 1 Introduction

The objective of this thesis is finding out what Japanese customer service is and how it differs from the service styles used in other countries. Through this study I aim to find out how Finnish businesses, especially in the hospitality sector, could make use of this service style to better serve Japanese tourists in Finland.

The thesis is not commissioned; I chose the topic out of personal interest. I hope my findings will be useful for Finnish businesses catering to Japanese customers, who are used to the service in their home country and might appreciate similar service here (Reisinger & Waryszak 1994). Even if the Finnish businesses do not adopt a Japanese service style, it might help employees understand their Japanese customers better if they know what they are used to.

Japan was chosen as the focus for this thesis due to my own interest in the country and experience of the service style there. My idea for this topic came from personal experiences, since I, while travelling in Japan, have experienced great customer service on multiple occasions. I have found that the level and quality of service is generally high, but some experiences have stuck with me even years later. One of these experiences is a time when I wanted to buy a train ticket. Due to some trouble finding the train station, I was running late for my train, but the employee at the ticket counter quickly got me a ticket and even went so far as to personally bring me to the train to make sure I got there on time and found the right car. This mentality of going out of their way to serve a customer is something I have experienced over and over again, which is why I wanted to write about it. Furthermore, Japanese tourists to Finland are increasing all the time, and tourism is an important industry, so providing satisfactory customer service is important.

This study seems to be one of the first that have been done on Japanese customer service with the goal of finding out what Finnish service providers could learn from it to better serve Japanese tourists. This makes it useful for the industry since it is important to know how to provide good service in order to keep the customers satisfied.

The thesis starts by discussing tourism in Finland: its importance and growth, the number of tourists that visit, and Japanese tourists. It then goes on to discuss what customer service is in general, how to provide good service and what customers expect and think is important when it comes to service. After that, the Japanese service style, and how it differs

from the styles of other countries, is explained. I then explain the research objective, research methodology and delimitations. I present and discuss the results of my findings, and lastly discuss my own learning and provide suggestions for further research.

## 1.1 The importance of tourism in Finland

Tourism is an important and growing industry in Finland. In 2015, tourists spent €13,8 billion in Finland. €3,9 billion of that was spent by foreign tourists, which is double the amount spent in 2000. Tourism contributes 2,5% to the GDP, and it is expected to grow to 3% by 2025. 140000 people worked in the tourism industry in 2015 and 40000 new jobs are expected by 2025. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2017.)

The tourism industry's growth can also be seen in the number of nights spent in Finland. As can be seen in Table 1, both domestic tourists and foreign tourists have been increasing. From 13,7 million in 2009 to 15,2 million in 2017, domestic tourists increased with almost 1,5 million, or 11%. During that same time, foreign tourists increased with 1,8 million, or 38%, to a total of 6,7 million in 2017. Of those same foreign tourists, Asian tourists increased with 180%. This means that, in 2009, out of all the foreign tourists, 8% were Asians, while in 2017, 16% of them were Asians. Japanese tourists have also shown a steady growth trend, up from 134363 in 2009 to 238308 in 2017, or a growth of 77%. In 2009, Japanese tourists made up 36% of all Asian tourists, and while that number had decreased to 23% in 2017, the number is still significant.

Table 1. Yearly nights spent in Finland (Visit Finland)

Nights spent					
	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017
Domestic	13,677,332	14,480,403	14,380,610	14,227,773	15,172,645
Foreign	4,890,006	5,507,468	5,860,447	5,510,350	6,743,071
Asia	375,174	459,446	584,668	728,806	1,051,100
Japan	134,363	146,433	205,988	203,411	238,308

## 1.2 Expanding the share of Japanese tourists

According to a joint survey done by Aalto University, the University of Turku and the University of Tokyo, the Japanese' perception of Finland, especially among those who have been there, is positive. Overall, they have a more positive image of Finland than of Sweden and Denmark, which were the other two countries in the survey, but when it comes to

tourist attractions, Finland does not have the same kind of tourist magnets the other countries do. This did not however make Finland less attractive to the Japanese. (Aalto University 2016.) This result is consistent with data from 2015, according to which, among the Nordic countries, Finland's share of Japanese tourism is 44% (Suvanto, Sudakova, Kattai, Grinberga-Zalite & Bulderberga 2017, 12). Japanese tourists increased with one third in 2015 compared to 2014, although only 31% choose Finland as their main destination, while 43% are transit travelers, perhaps thanks to direct flights between Finland and three Japanese cities. 63% of those who choose Finland as their main destination come for leisure. (Suvanto & al. 2017, 13.)

For Finland, Japan is the 7<sup>th</sup> most important market in terms of foreign overnights, and the Japanese are in 3<sup>rd</sup> place when it comes to spending money. Additionally, the Japanese are one of the few nationalities whose spending has been increasing recently, even though Finland is seen as expensive. However, while the Japanese spend a lot of money, they stay for only a short time. (Suvanto & al. 2017, 13, 15) Perhaps due to this, they have high expectations on quality and customer service, and appreciate good accommodation and polite behavior (Suvanto & al. 2017, 26, 30).

Even though Japanese tourists might be increasing, there are still points Finland could improve on in order to attract even more tourists and improve their impression of Finland more. One of these would be to, according to a survey done in 2008, "expand the scarce tourist services" (Suvanto & al. 2017, 27). That survey might not be completely relevant today, as things might have improved since, but more recent reports state that Finland is seen as a difficult destination due to language difficulties. Especially older tourists prefer Japanese over English, both when it comes to information on the internet and local guides. (Suvanto & al. 2017, 30.) Unfortunately, businesses often have only a little information on their Facebook page, and it is usually only in Finnish. However, another, perhaps more important, point is Finland's lack of visibility in the Japanese market. (Suvanto & al. 2017, 37.)

Finnish tourism and hospitality business would be wise to take note of some of the current trends in Japanese tourism. Recently, due to safety issues and terrorism the Japanese are looking more at Eastern and Northern Europe. Although prices are high in Finland, safety is more important. (Suvanto & al. 2017, 33.) While terror attacks are unfortunate, they have given Finland an opportunity to steal the Japanese away from popular Western European countries and cities, and get them interested in the Nordics. To get them to stay and return, Finland businesses should learn about and focus on the interests of the Japanese. For example, Japanese tourists are interested in gourmet dining (Suvanto & al.

2017, 36). Upscale restaurants could take some pointers from the Japanese tea ceremony and kaiseki restaurants (discussed in chapter 2.3.1) to provide the customers with the best possible service. Furthermore, the Japanese are interested in guided tours and experiencing Finland like the locals do (Suvanto & al. 2017, 24, 36.) Part of the meaning of omotenashi, the Japanese word for hospitality, is that guests and hosts are equal. With the mindset of omotenashi, the two previously mentioned interests could be combined. With the tour guide acting as an equal, and in turn considering the visitor a friend, guided tours would be able to show Finland through the eyes of a local, while still being professional. The fact that both Finland and Japan are high context cultures (a preference of using body language, and of silence over small talk) (Suvanto & al. 2017, 36) could make it easier for the people from both countries to understand each other.

## **2 Providing quality customer service**

Customer service is an integral part of the tourism and hospitality industry. It is the heart of any organisation and all employees whether they work at the front or the back office should strive to provide the best service they can. (Rattray & Douglas 2010, 2.) Excellence can only be achieved if customers are treated with warmth, kindness and thoughtfulness (Golubovskaya, Robinson & Solnet 2017, 1282), so it would be natural to assume that the quality of the service depends on the employees' behaviour, but it is more than that. Customer service starts with the customers finding you. Up-to-date information about your organisation, regular opening hours, and easy-to-find and accessible locations are all part of customer service and the important first impression. (Rattray & Douglas 2010, 3.)

Staff working in the back office, for example as a telephonist, should have the same kind of knowledge about your premises and services as those working at the front desk. Just like staff who meet and greet customers face-to-face, they should be warm and welcoming even though they are talking through the phone. All staff should be approachable and friendly and be able to answer questions about the premises, services, the local area and current events, as well as be able to handle complaints. Also part of customer service is the cleanliness and maintenance of your premises. It is not necessary to offer all possible kinds of facilities available, but it is a good idea to listen to what customers want, and develop your facilities accordingly, for example installing accessible toilets or wheelchair ramps. (Rattray & Douglas 2010, 3-4, 13.)

Part of good customer service is continuous development and handling of complaints. Surveys and feedback are two valuable tools that can be used to help develop the services according to customers' wishes. Both positive and negative opinions should be taken into account, responded to, and acted upon whenever necessary and possible. All members of staff should be trained in how to handle complaints. It is important to note that for the customer, the way that staff handles a complaint is more important than the complaint itself. (Rattray & Douglas 2010, 8-9.)

Most literature on hospitality is written from a managerial and business point of view. The focus is on how to provide accommodation or food as a service, disregarding the spirit of hospitality. Even the vocabulary is changed from hosts and guests to service providers and customers, and generosity to value for money. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1283.)

Golubovskaya & al. (2017, 1284) refer to the three main components of hospitality – food, beverage, shelter – as the “holy trinity”. The trick is to generously provide the guests with



these things while also keeping a balance between profitability and customer satisfaction. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1283.) Originally, hospitality “functioned to provide safety and protection, friendliness, connectedness to cultural norms and traditions, as well as defining kinship, community and group identity, thus playing a vital role in society” (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1285). While this sort of hospitality might be found in certain places, what is common nowadays is commercial hospitality that serve the guests with money as motive. The hospitality industry prioritizes money and efficiency, and the focus has shifted from hospitality to business. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1285-1286.)

In an ideal situation, the host and the guest should be considered equal, but in a commercial situation, the host focuses on the guest and his money. One should remember that although one can be a good host and be able to care for the guest perfectly, it is not necessarily the same thing as being hospitable. If there are ulterior motives – for example money – one is not being hospitable. Being hospitable is being genuine. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1286.) Hospitality is important also in a commercial situation focused more on service; service should be delivered in a hospitable way. If service is the technical performance, hospitality is the attitude with which it is performed. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1287.) The difficult part is executing this. If employees do not understand what is meant by hospitality or service performed in a hospitable way, they will not be able to perform their service properly and be hospitable. This may have an impact on how customers view not only the employee but the entire hotel. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1288, 1299.)

Golubovskaya & al. (2017, 1288-1296) did a study in Australia with 22 employees working in 4-5-star hotels, which revealed what employees themselves think of and know about hospitality. The study included five different themes: employee-customer contact moments, exceeding expectations, personality traits, power (in)equality and emotional labor. The participants were interviewed for an average of 25-30 minutes. The majority of them had a degree related to hotels or hospitality.

In the first theme – employee-customer contact – the participants saw themselves as representatives of their hotel, and in that way responsible for providing service. They deemed face-to-face interaction especially important. If they did not see the guest, for example if they were talking to them over the phone, they did not care about them as much and found them less important than if they would have been standing right in front of them. The participants also thought that behaving professionally and according to the hotel's values was enough to serve the guests well. They emphasized efficiency and speed over

welcome and warmth. This focus on professionalism may lead to predictability and be destructive for the industry. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1293-1294.) Like mentioned earlier, being a good host does not necessarily mean being hospitable.

Contrary to the opinions revealed in the first theme, the participants of the study sounded more hospitable when talking about the second question: exceeding expectations. The participants were of the opinion that employees should think ahead and predict the guests' needs and provide better service than expected. This sort of thinking is in accordance with the meaning of hospitality. However, the reason for being hospitable varied. Participants working as managers did it from a financial perspective, hoping that satisfied guests would return. Front-line employees, on the other hand, were genuinely hospitable in their actions of going the extra mile to please guests and make them happy. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1294.)

The third theme in the study examined personality traits, a topic on which participants agreed that people working in hospitality should have the right kind of personality for the job, be happy, extraverted and caring about people. Some participants genuinely cared about being hospitable and liked to help and take care of people. They saw themselves as hosts that worked to make the guests feel at home similar to being in a private setting. Others saw their extraversion as a means to success and money. If you are good with people and the guests, you are a good employee, so you earn more money. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1295.)

There were two main answers to the fourth question of the interview: power (inequality). Some participants were of the opinion that if you work in service, you are a servant and below the guest. Others saw themselves and the guests as equals. They believed that mutual respect is important, as it is indeed an aspect of hospitality. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1295.)

Emotional labor was the last theme. Emotional labor is what employees do in addition to their physical work, like smiling and acting happy. The participants knew the importance of smiling on the job and that guests might notice if the smile is insincere, for example if the employee is feeling bad. Instead of just smiling, some participants said that it is better to convince oneself that one is feeling happy; after a while, one will eventually become happy, and as a result be sincerer with the guests. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1296.)

All in all, the study showed that while there is a will to be hospitable, the employees might not fully understand what is meant by it, and their workplaces' practices might affect their

behavior. The study also showed that the industry is so focused on efficiency and service that they are forgetting what hospitality is all about. Most of the participants simply regarded hospitality and service as the same thing. Service was regarded as mandatory, while actually being hospitable and genuinely care for the guests was not. In some cases, the hotel and its regulations limited hospitality. (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1299-1300.)

## **2.1 Quality service is important for a positive guest experience**

Gilbert and Gao (2005, 306-308) state that service quality has an impact on an organization's performance and competitive position. They measure service quality by looking at a customer's expectations of a service they will be receiving and then afterwards at their experience with said service. The result may then fall into what is referred to as "the zone of tolerance". Each customer has a different zone of tolerance, and this zone may differ from one time to another. Even if an experience does not live up to expectations, it might still be acceptable. Customers hold an either conscious or subconscious belief of how acceptable a certain experience is going to be based on, for example, previous experiences with the same company. If the experience falls within their zone of tolerance, it is acceptable. If the experience exceeds expectations at the upper end, it is outside the zone of tolerance, but the customer will be pleased. If the experience falls outside of the zone of tolerance at the lower end, the customer will be displeased.

The reason behind many cases of displeasure with service quality is not that customers hold too high expectations, but distrust with a company due to the company having promised too much or broken promises made. Thus, it is important for companies to keep their image in mind when marketing their services. They need to focus on the experiences they will provide the customers with, and one way to provide a satisfactory experience is to focus on the customers' emotions. A customer's emotions during a service encounter may affect their zone of tolerance, or how satisfied they are with the service quality. For example, positive emotions during an encounter may prompt a revisit while negative emotions will not. Paying extra attention to a customer will help ensure positive emotions, while negative emotions are the result of failure to reach minimum expectations. A benefit of eliciting positive emotions in a customer is that it will influence buying decisions positively, both at present and in the future, that is, a happy customer will spend more money at your establishment and has a higher chance of coming back compared to a dissatisfied customer. (Gilbert & Gao 2005, 308-309.)

Desmet, Guiza Caicedo & Van Hout (2009) further state that hotel guests' emotions in reaction to their experiences play an important part in their satisfaction and loyalty. The

more loyal they are to an establishment, as a result of positive experiences and emotions, the more tolerant they also are with occasional failures or bad experiences. They say that guests may experience a variety of emotions, good or bad, as a result of not only the staff, but also the architecture, the view from the room or cleanliness.

Desmet & al. (2009) in a survey analyzed guests' emotional responses to all aspects of a hotel stay and the experiences the guests most often mentioned to have had either a positive or negative impact on their emotions. All responses are not relevant for this thesis, but it is worth mentioning that for both pleasant and unpleasant emotions, hotel staff scored the highest. That is, the hotel guests surveyed most frequently stated that staff behavior had the largest impact on their stay, whether the experience was good or bad: 12.7% reported that they had had a pleasant experience with staff, while 22.5% had had an unpleasant experience. In total in the entire survey, there were 221 cases of pleasant experiences reported and 169 cases of unpleasant emotions, which means that the majority of the guests should have been satisfied with the stay as a whole. It is worth looking closer at the hotel staff, though, and while these numbers are not the same in all hotels, it is important to remember that staff behavior has an impact on guest emotions and in turn their experience as a whole and their willingness to return or recommend the establishment to others.

Liu, Teichert, Rossi, Li and Hu (2017, 558-559) have found similar results. In a study they did of online reviews of Chinese hotels by guests from various different countries, both Asian and Western, service was reported to be the most or one of the most important aspects of the stay. Japanese people in particular rated service as of very high importance.

## **2.2 The impact of language on service quality**

According to Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2011, 1659-1660) the language used in a service situation has an impact on how the customer judges the quality of the service. If the service provider and the customer do not speak the same native language, communication might suffer, which might lead to misunderstandings that affect quality. In a situation like this, either the service provider or customer would have to switch to the other person's language. Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2011) carried out two studies in three bilingual countries, Canada, Finland and Belgium, in which they studied how important customers perceived the use of their native language by a service provider. Six service types, either low- or high-involvement, were used: low-involvement, for example ordering a drink at a café, means that there is not much need for communication, and high-involvement, for example a medical visit, means that communication is important.

The results showed that, for customers in low-involvement scenarios the service provider's use of their native language was less important than in high-involvement scenarios, where they preferred the service provider to speak their language to prevent misunderstandings and ease communication. Furthermore, the studies showed that older customers are more likely to prefer to be served in their native language even in low-involvement scenarios, than young customers. Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2011, 1667-1668) go on to suggest that in bilingual markets, especially in high-involvement services, care should be taken to ensure that customers will be served in their native language. Despite a customer being bilingual, they often prefer to use their native language over their second language. They say managers would benefit from employing employees competent in multiple languages or encouraging employees to take language courses.

While the above-mentioned studies did not focus on the hospitality industry in particular, Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2011, 1281-1283, 1286) conducted another study on tipping in restaurants and how the service language relates to the customer's willingness to tip. The study was done with Dutch-speaking Belgians and Swedish-speaking Finns, put in one of three pretend restaurant scenarios set in either Brussels or Helsinki. In the first one, the customer was served in their native language (Dutch or Swedish) by a speaker of that language, in the second they were served by a waiter speaking their native language with an accent, and in the third they were served in their second language (French or Finnish). In the study set in Belgium, in scenario one, 81% of respondents would tip the waiter; in scenario two, 67% would tip; and in scenario three, 25% would tip. The corresponding numbers for the Finnish study were 55%, 65% and 40%. While the numbers for Finland were rather similar in all three scenarios and the differences were larger in Belgium, the results showed that, as long as the waiter spoke the customer's native language, whether fluently or with an accent, the customer was more likely to tip and was thus more satisfied with the service, than if the waiter spoke their second language and did not make an effort to try speaking in the customer's native language. In other words, the language a service provider uses in a service situation has a direct impact on the customer's behavior (willingness to tip) and their impression of the quality of the service.

While the studies mentioned above were of customers in their own countries and their perception of language use in the services they took part in, somewhat similar results can also be seen in tourists. Reisinger and Waryszak (1994) found that Japanese tourists (whose English was lacking) in Australia were disappointed with the Australian shop em-

employees' inability to speak Japanese. The difficulties in communication had a negative impact on the tourists' perceived quality of the service. Before arriving, the Japanese had expected the Australians to be better at Japanese than they turned out to be, which was also a factor in how they viewed the service; the reality was disappointing to them.

Reisinger and Waryszak (1994) note that English is mandatory in Japanese schools, but the Japanese are afraid of making mistakes or embarrassing themselves or others, so they avoid speaking it. Therefore, they appreciate it if the service provider speaks Japanese, especially in situations where they want to be understood. Furthermore, to the Japanese, the service providers ability to speak their language is about more than communication. They see it as the service provider making an effort to please them. In Japan, efforts are made to make foreign tourists feel like guests, so the Japanese expect the same in return when travelling abroad. Another study done in the UK of Japanese tourists had some of these same results. One reason the Japanese tourists chose to go on a packaged tour was that by doing so they could avoid speaking English or other foreign languages. Although they have studied English, they are too anxious to speak it and are afraid of being embarrassed. (Gilbert & Terrata 2001.)

### **2.3 The Japanese service style**

The Japanese word *omotenashi* is usually translated as hospitality in English, but the word has a deeper meaning in Japanese. According to Morishita (2016, 157), the word has four meanings: "(1) treating guests, (2) offering feasts or receptions, (3) understanding the behaviors or attitudes of people, and (4) the treatment or procedure of certain activities". He goes on to explain that "the etymology of the term stems from 'truthful contact with others' and 'establishing/creating better human relations.'" (Morishita 2016,157).

Ikeda concurs with the idea that *omotenashi* means more than just hospitality, claiming that "'omotenashi' is the ultimate spirit of hospitality" (Ikeda 2014, 150). As an example, he says that although the guests at hotel Peninsula Tokyo "do not count the services, they can feel the hospitality as part of the entire experience" (Ikeda 2014, 150). *Omotenashi*, then, is more of a mentality of being accommodating at every moment, and providing guests with a seamless experience where the hospitality neither starts nor stops, but continues during the entire visit.

The Japanese traditionally have very high expectations of service not only when giving it but also when receiving it. These expectations follow them when going abroad. In a study made of Japanese tourists in Australia, it was found that the Japanese were disappointed

with the service and the lack of Japanese-style service. They had expected the same high level of service they were used to from back home and were disappointed when the Australians did not live up to their expectations. (Reisinger & Waryszak 1994.)

### **2.3.1 A service style based on rules and mutual understanding**

The concept of omotenashi is thought to have its origins in the tea ceremony. The Japanese tea ceremony is more than just drinking tea. In addition to learning how to make and serve tea by using a specific set of body movements, practitioners should have knowledge of Japanese history, zen buddhism, flower arranging, ceramics, etc. Mastering all this takes years or decades. (Sato & Parry 2015, 521-522.)

The tea ceremony is made up of four principles. One of these is seasons, and one school has 15 of them. These different seasons are expressed using seasonally appropriate objects like sweets, flower arrangements, hanging scrolls and utensils. For example, a cup used in summer should cool down quickly. (Sato & Parry 2015, 522.)

Two of the other principles are about the relationship between the host and the guest. The tea ceremony is a ritualized interaction, and good intentions are not enough. The ritual should be done properly in order to properly express the feelings of hospitality. At the same time, there should be a mutual understanding between the host and the guest. The host needs to understand the guest in order to behave properly. For example, if the guest is a child, the host can make the tea cooler. (Sato & Parry 2015, 522-523.)

Green tea and the tea ceremony have a long history in Japan. The tea ceremony represents key Japanese cultural values, so the Japanese connect the tea ceremony with omotenashi. And like these are connected, the principles of the tea ceremony can also be used in restaurants. For example, in an upscale kaiseki (a traditional cuisine style developed for the tea ceremony) restaurant the décor, like utensils and flowers, and the menu would be chosen based on the seasons. A certain bowl with a seasonal picture might only be appropriate for use for a few weeks every year, but it is omotenashi to use it and guests will appreciate it. Additionally, if the owner has any knowledge of the guests that will be dining there, their visit should be customized to them based on that knowledge and understanding of them. Of course, the guests themselves also need knowledge of the tea ceremony and culture in order to properly understand the experience. (Sato & Parry 2015, 521, 524-525.)

Similarly, a ryokan (a traditional Japanese-style inn) showed that they clearly understood the spirit of omotenashi and understood their guests and took them into consideration, when they changed their traditions to better accommodate their foreign visitors. The ryokan, having become popular with the Taiwanese, changed its kaiseki menu to hot, spicy food. (Fitzpatrick 2006, 34-36.)

### **2.3.2 Service that keeps improving and changing based on the situation**

The Japanese think that in order to satisfy your customers, you should be able to meet their expectations. Ideally, the value of your product or service should exceed the expectations. To succeed, it is important to understand customer behavior and that that behavior will vary and change. (Ikeda 2014, 146.) Ikeda (2014, 147) uses the Japanese expression *ichi-go ichi-e* to explain this behavior. He translates this expression as meaning that even if you meet the same man more than once, the encounters will change because people change. In a service situation, the *omotenashi* will change according to each situation, and there is no “one-size-fits-all” (Morishita 2016, 157). Ikeda (2014, 146) applies this expression to marketing and service by dividing customer behaviour into three dimensions. In the first dimension there are differences between the various customers. In the second, there are differences in the same customer, for example, the customer wears different outfits in different situations. In the third dimension, that same customer’s preferences change with time.

Ikeda equates *ichi-go ichi-e* with one-to-one marketing because of how each customer is approached differently. He says that *ichi-go ichi-e* is like reading between the lines the way one reads between the lines in a story. (Ikeda 2014, 149.) By studying the customer’s behaviour and reading between the lines, the marketer, or service provider, will know how to best approach that particular customer in a certain situation. Ikeda (2014, 152) refers to this practice of learning to read between the lines as *kaban-mochi*. *Kaban* means bag and *mochi* means to carry. When learning a job, the learner shadows his teacher, or superior, and follows him around, as if carrying his bag for him.

Senior staff is in charge of showing the new employees the job, all the time overseen by a manager. There is no manual but the new employees have to observe their seniors and then apply what they have learned in practice. Customers give feedback, and the employees adjust and improve their *omotenashi* based on it. When an employee is good enough at *omotenashi*, the cycle continues with him or her becoming the teacher. Other ways of learning and improving *omotenashi* also exist, of course. For example, a business can hire a consultant to teach staff, staff can be sent to workshops to learn, and receptionists



and room service staff can communicate with each other and share information on guests to prepare for their visits. (Morishita 2016, 158-159.)

However, no matter how good someone is at providing *omotenashi*, or how high the level of *omotenashi* is at a certain business, it will never be perfect. *Omotenashi* is imperfect, and this is where *kaizen* comes in. The word means continuous improvement. It was first used in factory management, but is today used in all fields. Like explained earlier, *ichi-go ichi-e* means that customer behaviour changes all the time. Therefore, *omotenashi* must change and adapt to each new behaviour, it must evolve and improve in order to provide the perfect result. And even if *omotenashi* manages to be perfect in one situation, it might not be in the next, because the situation has changed. (Ikeda 2014, 152-153.) To be able to improve the service, customer feedback is important. Based on this feedback, employees improve their service, get new feedback, and the cycle of continuous improvement continues. (Morishita 2016, 159.)

Businesses might even cooperate with each other, even if they are rivals, in order to together raise the overall level of quality of service. In Kurokawa Onsen (a hot springs resort in Japan), rival ryokans share knowledge and information to make the entire resort better. The ryokan owners visit other ryokans to learn and improve their own *omotenashi*. (Morishita 2016, 157, 159-160.)

## **2.4 Differences in hospitality between countries and cultures**

Sato and Parry (2015, 520-521) explain how the concept of customer service is different in the West and in Japan. The West focuses on satisfying customers' needs. The customer is the king and the service provider is the servant. In Japan, on the other hand, the customer and service provider are equal, there is no hierarchy between them. In other words, what mainly distinguishes Japanese service from Western is the mutual consideration and understanding of each other, the host and the guest. Additionally, just like the service provider and customer are seen as equals, both parties should be satisfied with the interaction. This can be compared to the West, where service providers strive to satisfy the customer only. (Sato & Parry 2015, 523-524.)

*Omotenashi* is willingly performed service, with no expectations of tips, in contrast to some Western countries where tips are expected. This approach to service is based on and influenced by courtesy, modesty, and Japanese culture and lifestyle. There are, of course, similarities between the West and Japan, such as welcoming guests and responding to their needs. (Morishita 2016, 157.) Nevertheless, it seems like five-stars hotels in

the United States cannot compete with five – or even three – star Japanese ryokans when it comes to service quality (Fitzpatrick 2006, 34-36).

There are certain criteria that customers from all over the world regard as aspects of good service, such as that it is timely and that the service provider knows both the product and the customer. However, what counts as excellent customer service differs between cultures, so something that might be perfectly acceptable in one country might not be in another. People from different language and cultural backgrounds prefer different things. (Shinomiya 2011, 2-3; Liu & al. 2017, 559.) For example, in the United States, customers might expect an employee who confidently lets them know that they will get the job done, while chatting with the customer or even joking with them. In Japan, on the other hand, this attitude would be frowned upon, as in Japan customers expect the employee to be soft-spoken, polite and humble while showing respect for the customer. And as a third example, in Scandinavia customers want an employee who straightforwardly provides the service and nothing else. Furthermore, these differences can be seen in the different use of language when there is a problem that needs a solution. In the United States, the service provider is indirect and provides suggestions for how to proceed while making the customer feel better about themselves. In Northern Europe, the service provider is direct and tells the customer what they have been doing wrong. In Japan, where there is a group mentality, the service provider will consult their supervisor or bring in a third party to help solve the problem together. (Shinomiya 2011, 2-3, 6.)

Shinomiya (2011, 3-5) provides examples that well illustrate the differences in service encounters in different cultures. For example, when visiting a restaurant in the United States, a customer might be met with a casual and friendly server who pretends to be their best friend:

Hi, I'm Heather, and it's my pleasure to be your server tonight. We have some really great specials I'd like to tell you about. They're all delicious, but my personal favorite is the shrimp fajitas seasoned with cilantro and epazote; they are just fabulous!  
(Shinomiya 2011, 3.)

In Asia, a polite smile would be okay, but the customer won't expect the server to pretend to be their friend. In Japan, the service style is a lot stiffer than in the United States:

I am sorry to have kept you waiting. You are very welcome here. The total is 4,757 yen. I humbly request 4,757 yen. I have certainly just received 10,000 yen. Shall I take it from 10,000 yen? Your change is 5,243 yen. I will first give you the large bills. Please confirm. Here is your (small) change and receipt. Please confirm. Thank you very much.  
(Shinomiya 2011, 3.)

These cultural differences are important to remember when serving customers. Customers tend to prefer service they are used to, or local service. Shinomiya (2011, 4) points out an American company whose customer service center is located in Bulgaria. Even though the employees had the knowledge needed to do their job well and were even offered courses in English pronunciation, they found that the Bulgarians' lack of knowledge of the American customers' culture affected the service. After taking a course where they learned about the culture, the results of their work were better as they could understand their customers' business environment and empathize with them. (Shinomiya 2011, 4.)

### **3 Research objective, methodology and delimitations**

The main objective of this thesis is to study the Japanese style of hospitality and find out what makes it different from the service styles of other countries. Based on these findings I want to find out what aspects of Japanese customer service Finnish service providers could implement, in order to better meet the expectations of Japanese tourists.

Tourism is a growing industry in Finland and Asians especially are coming here more and more. Japanese tourists are also steadily increasing. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2017; Visit Finland.) As mentioned in the previous chapter, satisfied customers are paying customers and more likely to return or recommend an establishment or destination to others. One factor that plays a big part in customer satisfaction is customer service and its quality. Thus, one can assume that high quality customer service leads to satisfied customers. It is therefore important to take a closer look at the customer service of both Finland and Japan (the countries focused on in this thesis), learn in what ways they differ or are similar, and how the service in Finland could be developed to better suit the Japanese.

Before starting to conduct my study, I had to choose what method to use between quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research is objective and scientific, and measures numbers. Quantitative research looks at the research problem from the outside and can make use of large-scale surveys. Qualitative research on the other hand is subjective. It looks at the research problem from the inside and is concerned with understanding the problem rather than analysing it using numbers. (Lancaster 2005, 67-68.)

By choosing a quantitative approach and doing a survey or conducting interviews I would be able to choose the questions myself and get answers to exactly the questions I have. However, I decided that the qualitative approach works better for the purpose of this thesis, as by choosing this approach, I could look deeper into the problem and try to understand it. I could get the whole picture of it, including the historical and cultural reasons for the Japanese service style being the way it is, something respondents to a survey might not be able to answer. There were negative aspects with this method, though, as I found later. Previous research on the topic is scarce, especially research on Finland. More information could be found on Japan, as well as other countries. Therefore, I had to make do with research done in other countries about Japanese tourists and their behaviour in some cases.

After deciding on my research method, I started the data collection for my literature review. As defined by Aveyard (2010, 5), a literature review is “the comprehensive study and interpretation of literature that relates to a particular topic”. In a literature review, you search for and analyse different pieces of literature which, when put together, form a new whole that can be used to develop new insights (Aveyard 2010, 6). After deciding on your research question, the next step is to find out what literature you need to answer it. A large amount of information might be available especially on the internet, so it is necessary to remember that not all of it is reliable (Aveyard 2010, 42-43). There is a hierarchy of evidence which means that some sources and research answer your research question better, for example a study done to determine whether A or B is better would have higher hierarchy than asking clients for their opinions on A and B. The higher up in the hierarchy a source is, the closer to the objective truth it is. (Aveyard 2010, 61.)

When starting to search for information, it is normal to first look for primary research, most of which is published in subject-specific journals. Primary sources are better than secondary (which refer to primary sources), as if you use a secondary source you do not get the whole picture of the original which might lead to misunderstandings or errors in reporting. In order to find all relevant information efficiently, it is important to do a systematic search, which means that you identify what kind of literature you need to answer your research question, use logical search terms based on the question, search through all relevant databases and look through the reference list of the sources you find. (Aveyard 2010, 60, 69-70). After you have found sources, you should assess them critically to find out whether they are relevant to your research, at the top of the hierarchy of evidence, and of high enough quality to include them (Aveyard 2010, 90).

When doing a qualitative content analysis, you might find concepts you did not expect but that are still important to consider. Based on these new findings it is possible to alter the research question to better suit these findings. When reading through and analysing sources you should make note of key phrases and segments that correspond to the research question. Different sources might describe concepts similarly, but it is good to look for differing views and ideas. During the process you should check your interpretation of answers to your research question against the sources. The evidence found might be expected, but unexpected points should be considered and might lead to new questions. (White & Marsh 2006, 34-37.) There are four criteria that can be used to determine the reliability of a source: credibility, where you identify the important points in the research question and describe how these points are reflected in the data. Transferability checks

whether a finding can be applied in different contexts. Dependability relates to the replicability of the findings and lastly, confirmability relates to the objectivity. (White & Marsh 2006, 38.)

I used exclusively information I could find on the internet, most of it peer-reviewed articles from journals I could find through Haaga-Helia's library's article search. The difficulty with this method was finding reliable and relevant references. Like mentioned above, previous research on this topic is scarce, and while it is easy to find information on especially Japan's hospitality by doing a simple google search, I found that a lot of it is not reliable or necessarily based on facts, but opinions. Likewise, it is easy to find information on Finland's service style in the same way, but most of the results are opinions written in personal blogs, and therefore not reliable enough for a thesis.

This scarceness of useable material led to another unforeseen difficulty: due to my own personal knowledge of having travelled in both Finland and Japan, and worked in the service industry in Finland, I found that I wanted to replace the lack of reliable references with my own experiences. I had to prevent myself from doing this in order to keep the thesis factual, but some personal opinions might have snuck in where they should not without my knowledge.

In this thesis I focus mostly on Japan, since it is written for a Finnish audience and as such the Finnish style of service and Finnish hospitality is likely known to the reader. Also, the point of the thesis is to learn about the Japanese style, which might be unfamiliar to many. Asian tourists to Finland are increasing in general, not only the Japanese, so it would be interesting to find out how to provide satisfactory service also for people from other Asian countries, but due to my personal interest in and knowledge of Japan, I decided to focus on Japan.

## 4 Results

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the Japanese service style and what makes it different from the service styles of other countries. In chapter 2.4 I gave some examples of differences in service situations, for example, Japanese employees are humble and respectful, while American employees might joke with customers and Scandinavian employees are straightforward (Shinomiya 2011, 2). As Shinomiya (2011, 4) writes, in the case of an American company whose customer service center was outsourced to Bulgaria, the results of the service improved after the Bulgarians were taught about American culture. Before that, the Bulgarians had been providing good service in general, but without the cultural understanding of their customers, the results were not as good as they could have been. This goes to show that with just some understanding of cultural differences, service quality can improve. The reason the Japanese service style differs from that of other countries is cultural and the style is based on Japanese culture.

Golubovskaya & al. (2017, 1285) say that the purpose of hospitality used to be to “provide safety and protection, friendliness, connectedness to cultural norms and traditions, as well as defining kinship, community and group identity, thus playing a vital role in society”. Nowadays, the emphasis is on money and profit as hospitality has been commercialized (Golubovskaya & al. 2017, 1285-1286). In Japan, however, one could argue that the original meaning of hospitality still lives on. As discussed in chapter 2.3, two of the meanings of the Japanese word for hospitality, *omotenashi*, is “treating guests ... understanding the behaviors or attitudes of people” (Morishita 2016, 157). The word is connected to the tea ceremony, which plays a large part in Japanese culture and whose rules influence also restaurants and accommodations (Sato & Parry 2015, 521, 524-525; Fitzpatrick 2006, 34-36). In the tea ceremony it is important for the host to understand the guest for the ceremony to be successful (Sato & Parry 2015, 522-523). Likewise, *omotenashi* is learnt using the principles of *ichi-go ichi-e*, which, similarly to the tea ceremony teaches you to understand the guest and that their behavior will change every time you meet them (Ikeda 2014, 146-147).

With hospitality being an ingrained part of Japanese culture, the Japanese have shown their expectations that when abroad, they should be provided with the same level and kind of service they are used to from back home (Reisinger and Waryszak 1994). Service providers who regularly come into contact with Japanese tourists should then make an effort to at least understand what hospitality means to them.

Starting with the basics, any business that deals with a lot of Japanese customers should make an effort to provide information about themselves in Japanese. As Rattray and Douglas (2010, 3) mention, providing up-to-date information, opening hours, and so on, is part of customer service, and if the business is striving to provide quality service, this is where they should start. The first impression is important and to the Japanese customers, especially those who might have trouble with foreign languages and would prefer to use Japanese even while abroad (Reisinger and Waryszak 1994; Suvanto & al. 2017), the fact that a business makes an effort to for example create a Japanese-language version of their website, or translating their opening hour-signs or other signs around the premises to Japanese, would give off a good impression.

Now that the business has given off a good first impression, the customers have hopefully stayed, and it is time for them to meet the staff. Whether the business is a hotel, a restaurant or a shop, some sort of communication will be going on between the staff and the customer. In the shop it might be nothing more than a quick greeting and the employee telling the customer the price of the item they wish to purchase. In the hotel and restaurant, the conversation will most likely be longer, as the customer is checking in or ordering food. However, in all three scenarios, the conversations are predictable. Whether the staff is telling the price, explaining what time breakfast is served or asking what meal the customer would like to order, in many cases, the staff can often get by using set phrases. It is not viable to expect all staff to speak or even want to learn Japanese, but as Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2011) found out in their study, if the employee makes an effort to speak the customer's language, even if it is with an accent, the customer will be more satisfied. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, some Japanese expect or want to be able to use Japanese while abroad. Finland, as a bilingual country, is used to different languages, so it should not take too much time or effort for employees who deal with a lot of Japanese customers to learn a few, usable set phrases. It would benefit both the customers and the business, as satisfied customers are more likely to return and recommend the business to other people.

As mentioned in chapter 2, Desmet & al. (2009) as well as Liu & al. (2017) in their studies found that staff behavior and service play an important part in customer satisfaction, and especially Japanese customers found service very important. Thus, it would be good for a business with many Japanese customers to take a look at its service quality. It might be found to be perfectly acceptable and of high quality in general, but it is worth remembering that service styles differ across the world (Shinomiya 2011). In Northern Europe the employee is direct and straightforward, provides the service and nothing else. While this might be exactly what Finnish customers want and value, the Japanese might be



shocked, as they expect humble and respectful employees. That is not to say that the Finnish employees are necessarily disrespectful, however some changes could be made in the service style when dealing with Japanese customers. It would not be enough to just appear more friendly, like the American style Shinomiya (2011) mentions, of employees pretending to be the customers' friends. Compared to the American style, the Finnish style is more suitable for the Japanese, as they do expect something more stiff and strict. Instead of just straightforwardly providing the service, though, Finnish employees could make sure to show that they care about each customer, for example by asking them if they enjoyed their visit or their meal, asking if they need something else, thanking them for their purchase, or telling them that they look forward to seeing them again.

Gilbert and Gao (2005, 306-308) mention "the zone of tolerance" and that one bad experience will not necessarily displease the customer. This is good to remember when providing service to foreign customers who are used to a different service style. Even if a Japanese customer finds the Finnish style lacking, they will not necessarily be dissatisfied with the service. However, employees should not take this for granted, as the zone of tolerance will change from time to time, and a great experience that exceeds the zone of tolerance might prompt a revisit. A customer's emotions affect their tolerance and consequently their satisfaction with the service. (Gilbert and Gao 2005, 306-308; Desmet & al. 2009). As Japanese people find service important, service providers should make sure that their service falls in the customers' zone of tolerance and hopefully exceeds it. The way to do this is to give the customer a positive experience, which can be done by understanding the customer and paying attention to their needs.

As talked about in chapters 2.3.1 and 2.3.2, in Japan, while there is a proper way to provide service, like how in the tea ceremony there are rules to follow, service should be adapted to each situation and customer. The Japanese emphasize that it is important to understand the customers in order to provide them with good service. Furthermore, the Japanese customers expect this kind of service (Reisinger & Waryszak 1994). So, for Finnish service providers to be able to provide the Japanese customers with satisfactory service, they need to first learn the Japanese service style to know what the customers expect. Again, as is the case with learning the Japanese language, it cannot be expected of Finnish employees to completely adapt their service style to the Japanese one or learn it as the Japanese do, through *kaban-mochi* (chapter 2.3.2), since *omotenashi* is an integral part of Japanese culture, and not just customer service. Still, it would be beneficial for Finnish employees to learn about the Japanese style to know what the Japanese custom-

ers expect. As discussed earlier, the Japanese service style is based on Japanese culture, so even learning a bit about Japanese culture in general, if not specifically the service culture, would benefit Finnish employees.

In conclusion, the Japanese hospitality is based on Japanese culture, which is why the style differs from the styles of other countries. The Japanese find good quality customer service important and expect good service when travelling abroad. The tourism industry is important for Finland (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2017) and the Japanese make up a significant and growing share of the foreign tourists (Visit Finland), so it is important to provide them with quality service. This can be done by learning about the Japanese service style and culture, and even some basics of the Japanese language, since the Japanese value being able to use Japanese while abroad. Providing customers with quality service will also directly benefit the businesses, as satisfied customers are more likely to return or recommend the business to others.

## **5 Discussion**

The results of the thesis confirmed my own views and opinions about both Japanese hospitality and what Japanese customers prefer when it comes to service; the Japanese value quality service both at home and abroad. The findings make it clear that cultural differences result in different service styles and that Japanese tourists expect to get the kind of service they are used to at home, or at least quality service, even while travelling abroad. It would be beneficial for service providers to adjust their style according to their customers. In other words, the answer to the research question is that Finnish service providers should learn from the Japanese and their style of service and use it to better meet the expectations of the Japanese tourists.

I did not use any quantitative methods like interviews or surveys in this thesis, but had I done so, the results might differ. The main findings are trustworthy, however, since they are based on peer-reviewed literature. The results of interviews would provide insight into the personal opinions of the people questioned and act as additional information or suggestions. It could have been a good idea, for example, to interview Japanese tourists and ask them their opinions about service in Finland and then come up with specific suggestions on improvement or development based on those opinions. The average tourist might not know much about, or be able to talk about, the history of *omotenashi* or the spirit of it, as the findings of the study made clear that to the Japanese, *omotenashi* is a part of the culture. Therefore, it is necessary to use qualitative research to explain and analyse it.

This thesis seems to be one of the first that studied the Japanese service style and how Finnish service providers could learn from it to better serve Japanese tourists. The findings are useful for the industry as, like discussed in chapter 1, the importance of tourism in Finland is increasing, as are the Japanese tourists. This study found out how to keep the Japanese tourists satisfied with their experience and how to provide them with quality service.

### **5.1 Own learning**

The research objective changed several times throughout the process of writing the thesis. Due to me changing the objective while writing, it at times led to me being confused about what I was writing, and also led to it taking me a longer time than I had planned to write it. It would have been better had I narrowed the objective down earlier on in the process, since that would have saved time.

Writing a thesis takes a lot of time and requires a lot of discipline and motivation. I had hoped that by choosing a thesis topic I was interested in I would also be able to find the motivation to write it, but I struggled with finding the motivation. Additionally, I have always been bad at time management. Consequently, the longer it took me to write, the more interest I lost in the thesis until it got to the point where I only cared about getting it done and not caring about the quality. In conclusion, while working on the thesis, I was reminded of the importance of time management and discipline, and making a writing schedule and sticking to it.

Looking for references and writing papers based on those is something I have had to do previously during my time studying, so that was not something new, nor something I had to learn. I did have to review how to evaluate sources and choosing which sources are reliable and which are not. I also had to learn about research methodologies and what methodology would suit my thesis.

## **5.2 Suggestions for further research**

Further research could be done on Japanese tourists in Finland. Using a quantitative approach, interviews or surveys could be conducted to find out how they find the service here and if it is what they expected before they came, whether they are satisfied with it, and if they would prefer a more Japanese style of service (provided they have been served using the Finnish style). It might be possible to get accurate enough results by interviewing tourists who have visited for only a day, for example on a day cruise from Sweden, but more accurate results would be obtained by questioning those who have been in Finland longer and have had time to experience customer service at a wide variety of establishments. Finding enough Japanese tourists to interview or answer a survey could be a problem, but might be able to be done together with, for example, the ferry companies or airlines which have information on the nationality of their customers. It might not be possible to find only those tourists who have been here for at least a few days, though, but with enough respondents, the results would still be accurate.

Finnish service providers who often come into contact with Japanese tourists could be studied to find out if they change their service style when dealing with them and what language they speak when doing so. Similarly to the previous suggestion, one could take a quantitative approach to this by conducting interviews or surveys. Hotels and restaurants, and design stores like Marimekko and Iittala, which are one of the images the Japanese have about Finland (Suvanto & al. 2017, 28) and should thus be popular among Japanese tourists, could be approached for this study to ensure a wide variety of service situations.

Review sites like Tripadvisor or questionnaires available for customers in the premises could be used to analyze the tourists' view on the service. This way, one could find out whether a store whose employees provide Japanese-style service have a better rating than one which does not, or if there is a difference at all.

In this thesis service quality was found to be important in customer satisfaction, so a related study to the one suggested above could be done on Finnish service and hospitality in general, as viewed by both native and foreign customers and tourists. Do customers find the service lacking in any area, and is there a need for improvement? For example, are employees respectful and do they care enough about the customers? With the tourism industry growing (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2017) it is all the more important to make sure the increasing number of tourists are satisfied to keep it growing and make the tourists return. Again, like above, interviews or surveys should be used to conduct this study.

Lastly, since Asian tourists in general are increasing in Finland – even more rapidly than the Japanese (Table 1) – a similar study as this one could be done on tourists from other Asian countries, for example the Chinese, who spend the most money out of any nationality and have more overnight stays in Finland than the Japanese (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2017), which makes them an important target group. Qualitative research and a literature review of peer-reviewed articles on Chinese tourists in general, and in Finland if possible, could provide the basis for the study. I was not able to use interviews or surveys in my thesis and it would be interesting to see what the results would be had I done so, so I suggest doing some kind of survey to get either the Chinese or the Finnish point of view, or both, on the matter of Chinese tourists in Finland. It would be interesting to find out if the results of the analysis of the literature studied would be the same as the results of surveys, and by using surveys it would be easier to get some concrete suggestions from the people involved about what things could be improved, if any, and how.

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